



## W&M ScholarWorks

---

Undergraduate Honors Theses

Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects

---

4-2014

# "Wit so rare and grace so peerless": The Collaborative Construction of Frances Sargent Osgood's Public Image

Madeline V. Benjamin  
*College of William and Mary*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses>

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Benjamin, Madeline V., "'Wit so rare and grace so peerless': The Collaborative Construction of Frances Sargent Osgood's Public Image" (2014). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 51.

<https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/51>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@wm.edu](mailto:scholarworks@wm.edu).

“Wit so rare and grace so peerless”:  
The Collaborative Construction of Frances Sargent Osgood’s Public Image

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from  
The College of William and Mary

by

Madeline V. Benjamin

Accepted for \_\_\_\_\_  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Jennifer Putzi, Director

\_\_\_\_\_  
Elizabeth Barnes, Committee Chair

\_\_\_\_\_  
Melanie Dawson

\_\_\_\_\_  
Karin Wulf

Williamsburg, VA  
April 11, 2014

## Life and Career

Upon her death of tuberculosis in 1850 at the age of thirty-nine, Frances Sargent Osgood was buried at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. When her husband interred her without a monument, poet Mary E. Hewitt commissioned fellow poets and writers who knew Osgood and her work to submit to a collection dedicated to the late poet entitled *The Memorial*. The collection of poems and eulogies, with an introduction written by Hewitt, was conceived of as “a souvenir volume, to which as many as might be of her literary friends should each contribute an article; and to devote the profits from its sale to the erection of a monument to her memory in the cemetery of Mount Auburn, where she is buried” (Hewitt 1). While this public outpouring of support for a deceased poet may seem unusual, it is representative of the public love Osgood garnered in her lifetime. Much like her career, her final memorial was a collaboration between poet and reader which would ultimately shape her public image and memory.

During the mid-nineteenth century, Osgood published widely and to great commercial success across the United States. During her brief but colorful career, she became one of the most popular writers of the day through widespread periodical publication, several compilations, and a final collected work of her poems. That collection, entitled *Poems*, was published first in 1845 in response to public demand for her work, and again posthumously in 1850 as a career retrospective and public memorial. Famous as much for her dramatic personal life as for her poetry, Osgood was a fixture of the New York salon scene and stirred up controversy surrounding a rumored love affair with Edgar Allan Poe, an admirer and later critic of her work.

Born in Boston on June 18, 1811, Frances Sargent Locke was the daughter of merchant Joseph Locke and Mary Foster, his second wife. Frances was raised beside her half-sister, Anna

Maria Foster, who was also a poet. Anna Maria was responsible for much of her younger sister's education and, from early childhood, fostered a poetic spirit in young Fanny. Osgood began writing as a child, even succeeding in publishing her work under the pen name "Florence" in children's and women's magazines, such as *Juvenile Miscellany* and *Ladies' Magazine and Literary Gazette*. After her marriage to painter Samuel Osgood, she moved to London and continued her career as a young wife living in England, before returning to the United States in 1839. Her career took off once she relocated to New York in the early 1840's, after which her work was widely read, published, and circulated until her death of tuberculosis in 1850.

Reviews and articles illustrate how the public felt possessive towards her, and poetry addressed to her suggests she was in conversation with an adoring audience who believed they knew her on a nearly personal level. Descriptions of Osgood recount her childlike character, innocent to the evils of the world, though she did not, in fact, lead a life without struggle. Her marriage to Osgood was a rocky one, as, after moving her half way across the world to England, he developed a disorder which impaired his vision and hindered his artistic career. She lost a daughter, Fanny Fay, in 1847, when the infant died in her arms. The couple briefly separated in 1847 amid rumors of an affair between Osgood and Poe, and Samuel relocated to Baltimore. In 1849, he moved to San Francisco to follow the Gold Rush, leaving her on the east coast with their two surviving children, and only returning just prior to her death in 1850 (DeJong 282). Samuel's uncertain financial situation and her own poetic success, along with her personal letters to publishers such as Rufus Griswold and Hiram Fuller, portray a woman who actively sought publication and negotiated on the price of her poetry while supporting her family.

In a cultural moment that did little to support women working outside of the home, Osgood built a successful career on the basis of her prodigious body of work and carefully

constructed image. Her career and public figure invited her readers to share in a manufactured intimacy between themselves and the poet herself. Her readership had an emotional investment in Osgood's morality, character and perceived personal life. This relationship was a conscious creation on the part of Osgood, who embraced a fluid professional character that invited the public in with flirtatious and seductive language which toys with, and at times embraces, the nineteenth-century conception of femininity and the female poet.

At first glance, Osgood's work appears to be what a modern reader would expect of nineteenth-century female writing: sentimental poetry, lyric verse, odes to flowers and the innocence of children. However, as with the work of many of her contemporaries, to read at such a level is to neglect her as both an artist and a complex business woman with an eye for publication. Like many other women publishing at the time, she had to work within a literary market that did not want to acknowledge that she was writing for profit, and went so far as to equate female publication with prostitution. To further her career within such a judgmental literary culture, she artfully constructed her public image such that she remained in conversation with an adoring public who admired her work and led them to feel an ownership over her character. It is this navigation of her public and professional personas that complicates a more traditional reading of her works.

This work will examine Osgood's poetry published from the late 1830's to her death and the way that poetry was shaped by and reflects the relationship she cultured between herself and her audience. Alongside her public poetess figure, who had written supposedly effortlessly since childhood, existed the professional working woman, and the salon socialite, who delighted the New York artistic elite with titillating and flirtatious works performed for intimate audiences. Her poetry and the reception of it makes a powerful statement regarding the nineteenth century

American consumption of female writers and the intimate relationship that was perceived to exist between reader and poet. In this manner, her poetic career and public image were formed out of a collaboration between poet, reader, and critic.

Osgood's reputation was central to her career, and I propose to examine, through her poetry, poetic responses to her work, and critical reviews, how she navigated her relationship with a readership that loved her for her angelic poetess character, yet accepted the duality of her public presentations of self. In this thesis, I will first examine her work in the context of the poetess, and how Osgood proscribed to the figure to gain popularity, after which I will explore Osgood as a flirtatious figure of "Fancy" who toyed with poetess purity. Finally, I will conclude with the argument that Osgood's creation of self was at once her own doing and the result of public response by an audience who felt invested in both her career and private life. Osgood's image was a collaboration between the characters she crafted poetically and personally, and the voices of her adoring audience.

### **Osgood as Poetess**

During the mid-nineteenth century, a woman looking to publish her poetry could not escape the heavy expectations surrounding the content and quality of her work. This meant navigating a literary marketplace informed by the realities and illusions of the "poetess" figure. With this knowledge, Osgood worked carefully within the label of the poetess, and tested the limit of that character, to shape for herself a career unique to her historical context. Osgood knowingly utilized the poetess figure to create a viable career and as a performed character which allowed her leeway in her less conventional pursuits.

Like many other working female poets of her time, Osgood gained notoriety for writing a certain kind of approachable and appropriately feminine poetry. Themes included children, fairy tales, and flowers, most offering a lesson for young ladies, instilling values of purity and piety. Osgood published a variety of poems, consolidated under the heading “Floral Fancies” in her collected works, which personify flowers and other earthly, garden figures. These works were often of moralizing nature, warning young girls of the dangers of jealousy and pride through tales enacted by sweet floral figures. The Lily was a recurring character in these fancies. She represented an innocent femininity in poems such as “Garden Gossip,” “The Lost Lily,” and “The Lily’s Reply.” In “The Lily’s Reply,” which was originally published in *The Ladies’ Companion* in 1842, when told by the Rose-queen to show off her beauty and grace, the Lily responds:

“I dare not hold so lofty pride...  
 For they, who lift too high their heads,  
 When Heaven, her sunshine o’er them sheds,  
 Too low beneath the tempest, lie,  
 Forgetful of Love’s sleepless eye.  
 And He, who gave me sweetness, grace;  
 Bestowed as well my fitting place;  
 And most I show my grateful care,  
 By yielding earth what I may spare...” (Osgood 15-26)

The poem is a reminder to be humble under the watchful eye of God, who is “Love,” and to give back to God all the blessings he gave to you. If one is prideful, they will be punished “beneath the tempest,” like sinners drowned in the flood. The Lily character plays the same innocent female role, one who knows her “place,” in the other fancies featuring her character. The flower is traditionally a symbol of virginity and purity. Her recurring, virginal character serves as one of the roles Osgood played as a publishing female poet. The tone of this work and works like it is

instructive and sentimental, written to be accessible to a mostly female audience, and especially to impressionable young girls.

While these poems seem at first glance simple, the stories they tell and the images they craft demonstrate a relatable morality and innate lyricism through which Osgood fulfilled an expected role as a poetess and drew in a widely varied readership. Joanne Dobson says of sentimental literature that “critical readers can recognize in accomplished writers the inherent effectiveness of sentimentalism’s transparent language and the intrinsic thematic richness of its affectional tropes” (279). Osgood’s use of approachable language and heartfelt, emotional subject matter gave her widespread appeal. And with that appeal, she was able to produce unexpected effects within sentimental literature. She had a readership who appreciated her skill and related to what she produced, so when she changed the script, they followed along.

While it is difficult to nail down a working definition of the poetess, it is an unavoidable task; as Osgood worked with and around the term’s defining characteristics, there is no avoiding its presence. Rufus Griswold, in the preface to his 1849 anthology *The Female Poets of America*, lays out the expectations and understandings about female poets and how they are distinct from their male counterparts. He never uses the word “poetess,” but his forthright manner of describing what he believed to be the truth about female poets illuminates the nineteenth-century environment in which Osgood worked. It was through his influential work as a critic and anthologizer that he shaped the public understanding of what a female poet should be, and his beliefs relied on a strictly gendered world view. Through his criticism he was able to “impose a narrow, domestic view of women’s poetry on women writers of the period. More broadly, we might see him as one of the creators of a poetic voice for women that attempted to constrain women from expressing the social and political opinions that many of them wanted to express”



(Wendorff). Griswold's professional influence, with this constrictively gendered philosophy, facilitated Osgood's published career, and further impacted her public image.

Griswold's ideal image of the female poet is a natural phenomenon, as she writes to express inspiration that comes from outside of herself. He states that what "may seem to us the abstract imagining of a soul rapt into sympathy with a purer beauty and higher truth than earth and space exhibit," is, in fact, "only the natural craving of affections, undefined and wandering" (7). Their seeming artistry comes from their "moral nature" (7), which means the "natural craving of affections" women poets experience is not the artistic superiority of male poets. Instead, it is "undefined and wandering," suggesting that women poets are directionless, as they simply channel natural desires without the necessity of ingenuity or creativity. While their poetry may appear as though it is imbued with a "purer beauty," it is in reality an undirected expression of natural character and in presentation is "the capacity to mirror in dazzling variety" (7) the work of male poets.

In an obituary he penned shortly after her death in 1851, Griswold writes of Osgood: "All that was in her life was womanly, 'pure womanly,' and so is all in the undying words she left us" (72). This seems to be the ultimate compliment in the eyes of Griswold, who also praised the awakening of her "dormant soul of poetry." This postmortem endorsement speaks volumes to the environment Osgood worked within, the figures who established her reputation, and the legacy she left after her dramatic, early death. Even while a modern reader might wish to condemn Griswold for his treatment of women's poetry, Osgood recognized the influential role he played in the industry and named him as executor of her poetry after her death. In her collected papers is a letter written in 1849, as Osgood was dying, that authorizes Griswold as her "attorney and agent to make any such arrangement or contract as he may deem just and proper... for the

publication of my poems” (Frances Sargent Locke Osgood Papers). Osgood legally put her works in the hands of this influential critic and publisher to ensure their circulation, and at the same time, ensured that his influence would remain on her legacy. She imbued him with the power to define her as a poet, and he held her up as his ideal poetess even as he exhibited skepticism surrounding female artistry. To prove herself in the US literary culture, she would have to employ the poetess figure in a way which best suited her, even if that meant working with Griswold’s language.

In understanding Osgood and the liberties she took with her poetess image, it is helpful to consider the poetess much as critic Eliza Richards conceives of her. For Richards, the poetess character is just that, a “character” donned in many different forms by different female writers. While poets as distinct in style and content as Lydia Sigourney and Frances Osgood fall into the category of poetess, it is because they were able to employ the character in distinct ways (65). In this way, Osgood was able to employ the ideally feminine, honest figure of the poetess to create a “[h]ybrid, paper self that combined the traits of the salon socialite with the properties of a widely circulating magazine” (62), and thus further her career in both circles. She had the flirtatious appeal of the salon both in and out of the salon, creating an intriguing sense of intimacy between herself and her distant readership through her femininity. She embraced the idea of a distinctly feminine poetry aesthetic by donning it as she saw fit.

Jackson approaches the poetess slightly differently from Richards, describing the term “as a trope in the pure sense, as definite and slippery as a turn of phrase” (57). The poetess is hard to grasp because she is a figure produced by the language used to discuss her; she is not necessarily the woman herself, but the figure that speaks for all woman poets at the same time. Jackson continues by saying,

[T]he nineteenth-century transformation of poetry from a set of verse genres to an aesthetic ideal that transcended genre may entail a transformation of the woman poet from a writer of various verse genres into the figure of the Poetess that exceeded conventions of gender and genre and thus came to represent Poetry. (57-58)

This suggests that the idea of the poetess was an inclination of the nineteenth-century to group all poetry together under a kind of common definition- to search for an “aesthetic ideal” over an exploration of variety in “genre.” If this were the case, that could account for the lumping together of woman poets of a variety of backgrounds into “the figure of the Poetess,” making her more than “conventions of gender” or a specific genre, but a representation of capital “p” “Poetry.” This suggests that “Poetess” evolved with “Poetry” and vice versa. What she produces and how she is imagined are one and the same.

In terms of Osgood, I find it limiting to identify her as another example of Jackson’s “trope” or motif because of her overwhelming popularity, circulation, and the unique relationship that allowed her to build with her audience. This suggests that Osgood did something with this role to stand out from the crowd. She did not simply “represent” poetry with this performance but found a way to create a sense of intimate connection with her readers. While this does also mean the employment of an “aesthetic ideal” (Jackson 57) associated with the poetess, and her role can be seen as a step in the ever evolving significance of the “Poetess” Jackson sees as vital in the evolution of poetry itself, in considering Osgood, Richards provides a stronger frame of reference. Osgood was in conversation with her audience and adapted her role throughout her poetry, suggesting a kind of performance-based definition. Osgood published sentimental odes to mothers and children in equal parts as salon inspired flirtations with her readers. As Richards asserts, her poetry implies that she is content with and knowledgeable about what she is performing and the “hybrid” she wants to be.

Still, while I appreciate Richards' definition as an excellent starting point, I argue that the poetess figure was a joint production between Osgood, her critics, and her readership. She referred to herself and her contemporaries as "poetesses" in her writing, (much as Richards imagines her donning the title as she saw fit,) but also, in a time when women publishing broke the code of their private sphere existences, relied heavily on Griswold for circulation. Griswold then had the ability to shape her public image even as she embraced it alongside her own variable nature. Readers engaged with images of childlike, angelic purity in their discussions of her character, while still being able to accept the poetess who wrote of the nymph-like "Fancy" in a seductive voice. This coproduction of self relied on circulation. By the end of her career, "for Osgood to retain respectability she needed to maintain maximum circulation, and her lyric promiscuity achieved the proper equilibrium between the figure of the author and the erotic voice of print" (Richards 104). This tension speaks to the expectations of her readers who believed they had some stake in her character, and to the realm of print publication as it pertained to women. Richards notes how being a widely read poet was associated with "promiscuity" in women because of the perception that they were sharing themselves with the public. Osgood was able to use this to her advantage by embodying the purity of the poetess to account for her "maximum circulation" and her "erotic voice of print" which was shared so widely, and protect against accusations against her character.

The difficulty publishing as a woman was not unique to the United States, but also held true for British women poets. Osgood's experience living and writing in England for five years in her twenties aided her navigation of this title of poetess. Sarah Klotz notes that early support from female poets like Anna Maria Foster and Lydia Maria Child encouraged her writing in the United States, and a female "literary network" in London helped her break into the male

dominated world of publication in England through the guise of the poetess. In a piece the two critics authored together, Virginia Jackson and Eliza Richards argue that “For nineteenth-century American writers who inherited the generic category of the Poetess from their British counterparts, that fact that it was an inherited category made it an available commodity for reconfiguration and redistribution” (Jackson and Richards 2007). The British figure of the poetess allowed Osgood to find a distinctly feminine voice and a place in the literary market. The notion that the term poetess was “inherited” from female writers in England gave her the opportunity to reinvent the meaning of the term as a “commodity” in an American market.

This writing community Osgood found in London as a poetess influenced Osgood heavily on her return to the United States as “Osgood later imported the salon savvy of [Marguerite] Gardiner to the United States and used the literary networking that she observed in England to forward her career at home” (Klotz 5). This poetess support allowed Osgood to gain access to the public sphere without losing her appearance of “true womanhood.” While her first collection, *A Wreath of Wildflowers from New England*, was published in England but never in the United States, it garnered her an immense level of popularity in England which gained her notoriety and fame back in the States as well. Klotz understands her transatlantic appeal as stemming from her experience creating an ideally feminine character, even with “a sense of irony” (8), to infiltrate the literary scene in England and gain legitimacy back in the United States.

Osgood’s poem “To the Slandered Poetess,” published in *Sartain’s Union Magazine of Literature and Art* in March of 1849, establishes the notion that Osgood was working consciously within a community of female writers looking to support one another, and also that she understood the performative literary environment in which she worked. Additionally, it

addresses the reality that being a poetess opens one up to criticism. By making herself available to readers and relying on the influence of figures like Griswold for her success, she was giving up a certain amount of control over her own image. Penned to a nameless young poetess, the poem offers advice and comfort to a figure navigating the literary world as a female poet. The poem implies that gossip is a fact of life in the public eye when it asks:

...don't you know  
     If you were homely, cold and stupid,  
 Unbent for you were Slander's bow?  
     Her shafts but follow those of Cupid.

'Tis but the penalty you pay,  
     For wit so rare and grace so peerless;  
 So let the snarlers say their say,  
     And smile to hear them, free and fearless. (Osgood 9- 16)

Osgood acknowledges the struggle of publishing as a female poet at the time by admitting that to be a poetess is to be a public figure. To fill that role is to accept from the public whatever commentary they wish to give. The implication is that being “homely, cold, and stupid” would protect a woman from public discussion, but it would also make her dull. To be talked about is to be proven worthy by a public who now owns some stake in you. She equates even negative attention with love, and at the same time, this love appears to be based on having a lovely, warm and bright exterior, an image Osgood worked to create and maintain. To be struck by “Slander’s bow” is to be deemed lovable in the eyes of the public. That “Slander’s” “shafts” should follow those of “Cupid” suggests both violence and intimacy. The public feels free to cast their love upon a poetess, but in the form of weapons, as if their love only sets the woman in question up for future damage at their hands.

The language of payment in the next stanza reminds the poetess that her relationship with the public is a financial one. This means she can profit from her “wit so rare, and grace so

peerless,” but she at times must pay a “penalty” for standing out. The female in the public sphere, especially one as popular as Osgood in 1849, is “peerless,” but it is dangerous to stand out from the crowd. There will be “snarlers,” and she suggests to the poetess that all one can do is “smile to hear them.” The tension of filling the poetess role is that it goes against the “homely” nature women are supposed to possess, but she must seek to fill an idealized female form. She must keep smiling, even if it is to prove to herself that she can live “free and fearless” as a woman in the public eye.

The final stanzas of the poem are personal and reassuring to the slandered poetess, and they read as if Osgood is speaking both to this other woman and to herself. Having had her character slandered by gossip and rumor, she knows firsthand the danger of living in the public eye and the role one must play as a poetess to deflect negative attentions. She again demands that the poetess “smile” against her critics when she admonishes:

You smile! – Nay, raise your queenly head;  
     Braid your hair, lest I upbraid it;  
 Be that last coward tear unshed,  
     Or in this dancing dimple shed it!

Serenely go your glorious way,  
     Secure that every footstep onward,  
 Will lead you from their haunts away,  
     Since you go *up*, and they go – *downward*.

Yet from your love-lit, heavenly flight,  
     Some pity dole to those who blame you,  
*You only* can forgive them quite,  
     You only, smile, while they defame you.

Oh! think how poor in all the wealth,  
     That makes your frame a fairy palace—  
 The mind’s pure light,-- the heart’s sweet health,--  
     Are they whose dearest joy is malice. (29-44)

Osgood repeats the word “smile” twice over the course of these four stanzas, in response to public criticism. The word appears like a mask the poetess must wear in the public eye to protect herself from those who would “defame” her. The direct threat she gives to the poetess, “braid your hair, lest I upbraid it,” speaks both to the image-conscious public and Osgood’s personal stake in the role of the poetess. The poetess must work on her appearance or risk being criticized for it, as Osgood warns the poetess. She must behave in a “queenly” fashion to fill her role. Osgood is, in a manner, threatening the poetess, saying that she will criticize her if she does not fill her role. The meaning of this tone seems twofold. First, public scorn will be worse than that of a peer, so the threat is protecting the poetess from a ruthless public. Furthermore, as her peer, Osgood may suffer should this other poetess not maintain appearances. The image of the poetess is shared among all woman poets, and if one falters, she risks damaging the public image of her contemporaries. The women who published already risked reputation simply through the act of publishing, and their careers depended on pristine images. Additionally, the line reads almost like Osgood speaking to herself in a mirror, as though she is addressing herself and her peers at the same time. It is a warning that she must be critical of herself before the public gets a chance to criticize her.

The whole poem places the poetess in a realm separate from the public that loves, chides, and injures in equal parts. Osgood puts the power back in the hands of the poetess in the final three stanzas, as she reassures her that she is made of purer stock than those who judge her. Her way is “glorious,” as the poetess goes “up” and her critics “downward.” The dash before “downward” further separates the paths and allows the reader to anticipate that what comes after the dash could be something hellish. That being said, the poem ends by both imbuing the poetess with “heavenly flight,” and suggesting that perhaps there is no escaping the public’s attentions



until one dies. It is the “heavenly flight” that gives the poetess the power to “dole” out “pity” “to those who blame” her, which is reminiscent of God’s forgiveness, or at least some higher power granting absolution. So while the poetess’s “mind’s pure light” and “heart’s sweet health” make her “frame a fairy palace” for fanciful images and beautiful purity, she may very well not escape those “whose dearest joy is malice” until she finds her pure spirit in heaven.

Osgood empathizes with the “poetess” in the poem because she sees herself as such a figure. She embraces her talent and charm, and the way those characteristics make her loved, but understands that she has given herself to a life in the spotlight. The public now has as much a right to criticize her as she does herself, and all she can do is smile while clearly embracing the title of poetess. Osgood used that title to mirror the public’s expectations and further her career, but this poem highlights her understanding that the power of the poetess also belonged to the public. Osgood could use the term as she saw fit, and so could critics and other readers. Osgood found flexibility in her identity, putting on and taking off characters as it pleased her. At the same time, she was forced to enact a performance of effortlessness. Like the “Slandered Poetess,” she had to appear perfect without trying. Even while her treatment of the poetess character illustrates how it is anything but natural, her audience expected that her purity of spirit was her guiding source of inspiration and moral propriety.

This tension of maintaining the figure of the poetess which Osgood chose to adopt appears at play in conversations regarding her production of poetry. Critics and readers of Osgood’s work promoted the idea that poetry came naturally and without effort for Osgood. One review of her *Poems* states: “From the quantity and character of verses produced by Mrs. Osgood, we should not only guess that she wrote easily, but that she keenly enjoyed the pleasure of writing. She seems to pour forth her spirit in a rich natural gush of language” (Frances Saregnt

Locke Osgood Papers). What was important for the writer of this review was that “she wrote easily” and “keenly enjoyed the pleasure of writing.” In this cultural necessity that she takes pleasure in her work we see just how impossible it was for Osgood to escape the title and implications of being a poetess. The pleasure of writing suggests a purity of intent, without desire for fame or wages, but just to speak the truth of one’s heart. This pure image, whether it contradicted Osgood’s career path or not, helped her audience create an appealing narrative around her character. For this reason, the difference between men’s art and women’s pure production was men’s struggle. Their genius came from talent and worried production. Female genius came from being receptive to inspiration outside of one’s control, as Victoria Olwell explains:

Like the artistic genius of the romantics, women’s genius assumes its authority insofar as it provides knowledge by spontaneous intuition rather than rational deliberation or calculated effort, even when intuitions turn out to be perfectly in keeping with standards of logic. (34)

Despite poems in which Osgood details the struggle of writing, critics need her to write effortlessly to maintain the image of natural ability. The supposed “intuition” may mirror “calculated effort” and logical thought processes, but the popular image of the female poet does not take this kind of “rational deliberation” into account.

In spite of the belief that writing was Osgood’s natural state, the work “gushing” forth like an unstoppable spring, Osgood’s writing suggests it was much more of a process. Osgood addresses this seeming contradiction in several of her poems. She employs language reminiscent of the age old convention of evoking a muse to both suggest that her poetry does not come without work and to satisfy a readership that expects female writers to be inspired by a force greater than themselves that expresses truth about the world. This gesture of embracing the traditional while addressing her real difficulties was a use of the poetess image which would help

Osgood's readership fit her reality into their image of her writing. In "To the Spirit of Poetry," published in 1845, Osgood offers the reader an intimate glimpse at her relationship with her work. She asks of this spirit:

Leave me not yet! Leave me not cold and lonely,  
 Thou dear Ideal of my pining heart!  
 Thou art the friend-the beautiful-the only,  
 Whom I would keep, though all the world depart!  
 Thou that dost veil the frailest flower with glory,  
 Spirit of light and loveliness and truth!  
 Thou didst tell me a sweet, fairy story,  
 Of the dim future, in my wistful youth! (Osgood 1-8)

This representation of Osgood's poetry suggests that inspiration is something that comes and goes for Osgood. When she begs to the spirit "Leave me not yet," she suggests it can leave; she would just like to hold it off awhile. She says that her poetry comes from the "dear Ideal of my pining heart." This image is particularly powerful in that it explains how the poetry Osgood writes represents the best part of herself. She is admitting that her poetry is an idealized side of her, and it is only because she has a poetic mind that she can see things as beautiful. When she says that this spirit is her "only" "friend," she implies a lifelong commitment to poetry. She needs to write poetry as she needs a friend, and her relationship with her writing is like that of a friendship. The spirit told her a "sweet, fairy story" in her "wistful youth," which suggests that she's had this kind of poetic imagination since childhood. It shapes the way she sees the world, making the "frailest flower" something noble. Osgood's poetic imagination is her "truth."

She may also be confronting the societal necessity of female modesty regarding poetic production. As nineteenth-century gender roles divided along public and private spheres, those women who stepped outside the private sphere could be said to take the private ethic of modesty with them. For Shira Wolosky, this means using claims towards modesty to bridge that gap.

While modesty in female writing can be seen as submission, “It also reflects the efforts of women to speak for and to female experience, to find a literary voice that will accord their sense of themselves as women, and even to articulate distinctive values and commitments”(156). Calling out to a muse, invoking a spirit of poetry, could be Osgood’s concession to female modesty and that aspect of the poetess character.

At the final line of the poem, Osgood pleads that the spirit “Fly not to heaven, or let me share thy flight!” (70). In this way, by asking to die if her poetic inspiration were to leave her, Osgood states the deep, abiding importance of poetry in her life and world view. This is a poem about both speaking with a disembodied muse who supplies her with poetry and also a desperate writer’s desire to return to the beautiful moment of creativity. The poem raises questions of agency as Osgood grapples with the weighty title of being a poetess. Perhaps she is divinely inspired, but she still must work to keep that inspiration flowing. She still must channel those inspirations into poetry. It will never be simple regardless of where the public believes her poetry to be coming from.

This struggle with the core understanding of being a female poet, as worried over by Osgood herself, also appears in contemporary discussions of her work. Mary E. Hewitt, another poetess of much repute and a contemporary of Osgood, wrote a number of poems to and about Osgood in praise of her poetic spirit and purity as a writer. One, which was given to Osgood in manuscript, is a parody of William Wordsworth’s “She dwelt among the untrodden ways,” published in 1789:

She dwells amid the world’s dark ways,  
     Pure as in childhood’s hours;  
 And all her thoughts are poetry,  
     And all her words are flowers.

Would you might hear her gushing voice,

So softer than the flute;  
Sweet as the angel Israfil's,  
Whose heart strings are a lute. (Hewitt 1-8)

Because of an innocent spirit, Osgood is able to remain “pure” despite the “world’s dark ways.” She cannot speak but in poetry, suggesting that it is her natural state to create poetry, and it is thus not a difficult process. When Hewitt writes that “all her words are flowers,” she references Osgood’s myriad flower poems, which implies that those works come from her every word and, again, are not representative of artistic merit, but spiritual merit. Much like in the review of *Poems*, her voice is “gushing,” as if she cannot stop the flow of poetry from her lips, yet at the same time it is “softer than a flute,” feminine, and non-threatening. Hewitt compares her and her poetic voice to the “angel Israfil,”<sup>1</sup> who is the trumpeter of God, and thus speaks his word through his playing. In suggesting that, like Israfil, Osgood’s “heart strings are a lute,” Hewitt expresses that, not only are Osgood’s words holy and God-given, but that her poetry is an expression of an internal song. Her poems are a direct transcription of the feelings of her heart.

Another manuscript poem addressed to Osgood by an unidentified author expresses a similar understanding of her writing process as depending upon her natural production of poetry:

Sweet poetess! Whence flow the springs  
Whose gushing fountains rise for thee  
Till in their freshness grow all things  
Beneath thy hand with poetry

Where is the deep unfathomed mine  
Which yields such treasures to thy pen? (1-6)<sup>2</sup>

Addressed directly as “poetess,” Osgood in this poem is a director of natural forces, not a creator of her own merit. Again, as in Mary Hewitt’s poem, the word “gushing” appears in reference to

---

<sup>1</sup> Eliza Richards notes that Osgood used the figure of “Israfil” in her work to refer to Poe, as “Osgood addresses Poe as if he were Israfil in order to reassure him that he can sing ‘wildly well’ as his celestial poet” (102).

<sup>2</sup> Unsigned manuscript from The Frances Sargent Locke Osgood Papers, 1838-1850 (MS Am 1355). Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Osgood's writing process. A gush is uncontained and unstoppable, as if it all poured onto the page at once. The fact that this language appears in criticism about her work and multiple poems in her honor suggests that there was some value in considering her writing in this manner. It was important for readers to envision her writing as a "gushing" forth, because it supported the image of the honest poetess who writes naturally and with no effort. This illustrates the way readers took her work at face value by associating her with expectations of the poetess. If her words gush forth, she is a recipient rather than a producer of her work. In that way, her power is that she can direct the fountains which "rise" for her, but she is just acting on an already existing resource. Here, her process is compared to natural elements, such as a "spring" and "mine" which give up natural treasures that already exist. She is not producing poetry, just uncovering it from some source within herself. Her poetry "grows" beneath her hand, as if watered by this internal spring. She unearths poetry from a "mine" which others cannot access, but it still represents a place where she may find her poetry fully formed.

This reliance on the poetess image in discussion of Osgood means that she is not the creator of her poetry, but the voice of some unstoppable internal force. She speaks directly from her soul and cannot help but to write. To a certain extent, she embraces that image, and portrayed her poetry as an idealized force within herself expressing otherworldly inspiration. Yet, while the conversation about Osgood centers on her "natural" poetic spirit, her process was like that of any other poet; it was an artistic struggle to craft something polished, not to uncover fully formed works via some unearthly poetic truth. Her manuscripts and papers show evidence of writing, editing, and revision, a process the poetess image does not account for. She embraces poetess language and the discussion of female poetic production, but also admits that she has other writing processes.

Similar to “To the Spirit of Poetry,” but also a seeming taunt thrown at those who believe exclusively in her endless, “gushing” flow of poetry, the tone of “To My Pen,” published in *The Columbian Lady’s and Gentleman’s Magazine* in February of 1847, is less desperate and more lighthearted. It is a comic caper about her wayward writing implement, which can be read as both a satirical commentary directed towards her readers and critics and an expression of her lack of control over her own poetry. In this way, it is a look at the more flirtatious side of Osgood. She uses the image of inspiration as an external force to taunt the reader with her own missteps, asking to be forgiven should she say something inappropriate, as she cannot be held responsible for her pen’s work. The poem starts:

Dost know, my little vagrant pen,  
     That wanderest lightly down the paper,  
 Without a thought how critic men  
     May carp at every careless caper,-

Dost know, twice twenty thousand eyes,  
     If publishers report them truly,  
 Each month may mark the sportive lies  
     That track, oh shame! Thy steps unruly? (Osgood 1-8)

In calling her pen a “little vagrant,” Osgood sets it up as her scapegoat for the rest of the poem, as if to say, if something goes wrong, blame the pen. She addresses both “critic men” and her readers directly, subtly pointing out that what they “may carp at” is the “careless caper” of a runaway pen. Here, also, we see Osgood’s professional intent. She obviously concerns herself with the size of her readership if she can rattle off the monthly number of “eyes” reported to her by the “publishers.” The language she uses is also provocative. She suggests that her pen can tell “sportive lies” to play games with the readers. If she is a proper poetess, Osgood speaks only her heart’s truth. But if her pen can lie, then that opens up a new world of poetic possibilities. It suggests that Osgood is entirely aware of the role she plays, and she certainly plays it. She

proceeds to call her pen “my fairy pen,” and as she herself adopts the flighty fairy image, she equates herself with the pen that lies.

The poem goes on to toy with the idea of truth and lying in regards to her pen, imploring the implement:

In faith’s pure fountain lave your wing,  
And quaff from feeling’s glowing chalice;  
But touch not falsehood’s fatal spring,  
And shun the poisoned weeds of malice.

Firm be the web you lightly spin,  
From leaf to leaf, though frail in seeming,  
While Fancy’s fairy dew-gems win  
The sunbeam Truth to keep them gleaming. (Osgood 37-44)

These two stanzas read like primer in how to be a proper poetess. They could be read as the truth, that Osgood is entreating her pen to stay within the bounds of propriety, and they could also imply that Osgood knows the rules of the game well enough to break them. She knows that what she writes is supposed to connote “faith” and “feeling,” and decry “falsehood” and “malice.” However, in the next stanza she creates the image of the pen spinning a web. One could equate that to a web of lies weaving some outlandish tale, or a trap to ensnare readers. This web initially seems “frail,” like it cannot stand up to inspection, but it is also covered in “Fancy’s fairy dew-gems” that will be enough to catch “the sunbeam Truth to keep them gleaming.” Osgood, as I will return to shortly, adopts the character of “Fancy” for herself, so it could be that her reputation, her “fairy dew-gems,” are enough to keep the web looking truthful. The tone seems like a poetess expounding the virtues of her poetry to a wayward pen, but it also appears that Osgood utilizes the pen’s ability to misstep to give herself some leeway. She expresses that she knows what she should be writing, but that she only has so much control over what comes



out of her pen, and that may or may not follow the rules. Here again the reader sees Osgood's conscious use of poetess discourse to embrace her variable persona.

Still, Osgood was a poet in high demand who was expected to produce a high volume of work that her readers would recognize. Eliza Richards reads "To My Pen" as being about the pressures of publication, which "exaggerate writing's automatic elements, resulting in indiscriminant disclosure" (86). She continues, "Under pressure to satisfy her mass readership, she has no time or inclination to clothe her thoughts and sends them out naked" (87). Richards' reading has less to do with the potential untruths the pen has told, but rather focuses on the raw quality of rapid production required to meet the demands of magazine publication. Richards suggests, in this way, that the public gets a clear image of Osgood's thoughts because she produces rapidly and haphazardly, the hand holding a pen that must respond to a demanding public. The multiplicity of possible readings of the poem suggest that Osgood's poetic flexibility allowed readers to perceive of her poetry and the process of creating it in whatever way they saw fit. Be her words accidentally truthful or the trick of a lying pen beyond her control, Osgood chose to toy with common conceptions of her role as a female writer.

### **Osgood as "Fancy," and Salon Flirtation**

The teasing pen is reminiscent of yet another character Osgood adopted during her career. A fixture of the New York salon scene, Osgood wrote, performed, and published flirtatious and enchanting poetry in which she portrayed herself as a beguiling ingénue. In order to fill this role, Osgood expressed a belief that there is not a singular femininity, but rather a multitude of femininities, of which she freely partook. Osgood's multi-layered public persona allowed her to use the imagery of sentimentalism to imply subtle rebellion against the literary tradition's

confining expectations for women. These suggestions hint at the allure of her more variable personality hidden beneath the guise of traditional female sentimentalism, and also speak to her acceptance of her own variable nature. She appears not to believe that a person must be one thing, but rather embraces the notion that surface images can exist simultaneously with complex, seemingly contradictory interiority. In “The Star and the Flower,” Osgood evokes the images of two female children, one representing a star and one a flower, each imbued with beauty and grace, though one is heavenly and one is earthly. Of the first child, Osgood writes:

There is something celestial about her;  
 I never behold the fair child,  
 Without thinking she's pluming invisible wings  
 For a region more holy and mild.

There is so much of pure seraph-fire  
 Within the dark depths of her eye,  
 That I feel a resistless and earnest desire  
 To hold her for fear she should fly. (5-12)

Here, piety mingles with otherworldly beauty in a way that is both familiar and exotic, evoking appropriate morality and yet suggesting something wild within. The child's “invisible wings” might, as in the first interpretation, be preparing her for a “holy and mild” destination, suggesting the child is of heavenly origin. At the same time, these wings cause in the speaker a “fear she should fly” off into the wilds of the wide open heavens. There are “dark depths” and “seraph-fire” in the child, and a pull towards something greater than this earth, alongside recognizable moral standards.

The second child is of an earthly realm, described as “a simple wild flower” to contrast with the celestial child, but with a similarly restless and excitable spirit beneath her pure exterior:

Her eyes have the dark brilliant azure  
 Of heaven in a clear summer night,  
 And each impulse of frolicsome, infantine joy  
 Brings a shy little dimple to light.

Her young soul looks bright from a brow  
 Too fair for earth's sorrow and shame;  
 Her graceful and glowing lip curls, even now,  
 With a spirit no tyrant can tame. (21-28)

Again, imagery of purity plays against something darker. Her eyes are the color of “heaven in a clear summer night.” The choice to refer to the sky as “heaven” forces the reader to view the child as angelic and the cloudlessness of said sky suggests purity. The image of “infantine joy” and “a shy little dimple” recalls traditional sentimental images of young girls who are a source of joy and bashful beauty. Even so, while her eyes could have been an innocent blue, they are instead a more mysterious “dark brilliant azure,” which gives them more depth and hints at more darkness within the child. The description employs traditional imagery which compares these two female children with nature. However, Osgood suggests that there is more to these children than their surface appearance, and that means there is more to little girls and women than beauty and a connection to nature.

The poem goes on to say that the second child's “brow” is “[t]oo fair” to be brought down by earthly “sorrow and shame,” suggesting that, even as a child of this world, she is too saintly to be sullied by forces of darkness. Even then, however, her lip may be “graceful,” but it portrays an inner strength “no tyrant can tame.” Like the images of errant flight and an uncontrollable nature, the image of the “tyrant” plays darkly against the rest of the poetic content. The suggestion is that “tyrants” will try to “tame” this little girl- and by extension, women- but it is her mysterious strength that enables her to resist. The constant shifting back and forth between images of innocence and images of darkness imply that female strength comes of adaptability and the ability to embody both characteristics. Without that mutability, Osgood implies, the “Tyrants” of the world will force their will upon women.

It is significant that both these children are female, suggesting an inherent restless strength within little girls that is hidden by their outward purity. Even as the final couplet concludes that one child is “loveliest still of the stars” (31) and the other the “fairest of flowers” (32), this final moral glosses over the darkness within the poem just as the children’s beauty hides their relationship to darker realities. Additionally, the two girls are different. The suggestion that there are different iterations of girlhood implies that there are also varied experiences of womanhood. Osgood is asking the reader to accept that there is no true womanhood. Women can be many things all at once, and Osgood lived by that standard within her own varied career.

Thus, while many of her contemporaries relied on images of purity in seeking publication, Osgood sought to fill a more variable role in the public eye, allowing her to embrace a figure of mass erotic appeal. As Richard’s explains, “Against the backdrop of celebrity reports in the literary magazines of the 1840’s, Osgood cultivated a reputation as a coquette whose poetry was an outgrowth of salon flirtations” (73-74). She was able to broaden her range as a poetess by embracing her changeable character and adopting the guise of “Fancy,” a whimsical, fairy-like figure that tested the bounds of the poetess’ public image.

This figure bridged the gap between the innocent and the flirtatious. Fancy is not bound by convention and expresses a freedom not available to many nineteenth-century women, but her mischief has a childlike quality about it. She may turn manly reason upside-down, but it is with dainty feminine intention and a childlike joy in the ensuing chaos. “A Flight of Fancy,” originally published in *The Columbian Lady’s and Gentleman’s Magazine* in April of 1845, positions Fancy as a fairy like creature on trial for entrancing and manipulating Reason. The “Judge Conscience” addresses Reason:

"Here, Reason, you vagabond! look in my face;  
 I'm told you're becoming an idle scapegrace.  
 They say that young Fancy, that airy coquette,  
 Has dared to fling round you her luminous net;  
 That she ran away with you, in spite of yourself,  
 For pure love of frolic -- the mischievous elf." (Osgood 7-12)

The danger presented by Fancy, the “airy coquette,” is nothing more than “pure frolic.” She is a “mischievous elf,” not a real danger unless, like Reason, one is to depend on order. When “pure love of frolic” is brought to trial, it makes the court seem foolish, as the poem goes on to list the dangers posed by Fancy. Her frivolity is the most distressing characteristic to Judge Conscience, who chides Reason for being taken in by her “changeable wings” (20) and “tresses of light” (23). Images of lightness and flight, language previously associated with the poetess figure, are high spirited and joyous, which makes the Judge look stodgy in comparison with Fancy’s entertaining nature. And this engaging power comes from her words, as the Judge chides that “she talks such language! – melodious enough / To be sure, but a strange sort of outlandish stuff!” (29-30). In this way, Osgood equates herself with Fancy, as she draws her influence from “language.” She uses beautiful, “melodious” language to seduce her readers into giving her the leeway to explore “outlandish stuff.” Osgood adopts the role of Fancy as she attempts to run away with her readers, “in spite of” themselves. She uses the mischievous, childlike character to break the bonds of convention and propriety in a way that seems to be “pure love of frolic” rather than anything threatening. She gives her readers the opportunity to discard Reason in favor of the delightful and entrancing.

Upon entry into the courtroom, Fancy’s behavior is delightfully distracting. She is described as a “strange little sprite,” who “frolick’d round Reason, till Reason grew wild.”

Fancy's strangeness and outlandishness represents the joy Osgood takes in doing the unexpected and occupying multiple roles in her public life:

Now up to the ceiling, now down to the floor!  
 Were never such antics in courthouse before!  
 But a lawyer, well versed in the tricks of his trade,  
 A trap for the gay little innocent laid:  
 He held up a mirror, and Fancy was caught  
 By her image within it, -- so lovely, she thought.  
 What could the fair creature be! -- bending its eyes  
 On her own with so wistful a look of surprise!  
 She flew to embrace it. The lawyer was ready:  
 He closed round the spirit a grasp cool and steady,  
 And she sigh'd, while he tied her two luminous wings,  
 "Ah! Fancy and Falsehood are different things!" (48-59)

Fancy is identified as a "gay little innocent," suggesting that the fairy figure is appealing because of her childlike glee, much like the way Osgood's innocence negotiated her multi-faceted career. She is ultimately trapped by a lawyer who preys upon her fascination with her own image. The only time Fancy gets into trouble is when rules and standards take advantage of her delight in herself. It is when she "flew to embrace" her own reflection that she is captured. Her flighty nature is only dangerous when her image is reflected back at her by the standards of general society. When she sighs that "Fancy and Falsehood are different things," Osgood is reminding the reader that, while the poetess is expected to be entirely truthful, her changeability is not Falsehood, but well intentioned Fancy.

When it comes time to put Fancy herself on trial, the witnesses who contribute to her sentence are "maidens of uncertain age, / With a critic, a publisher, lawyer, and sage" (60-61). Here Osgood calls out the arbiters of taste in the literary community. When poetry must be suitable for young maidens, appealing to critics and publishers, not infringe upon illegality and still appear intellectually worthy of the "sage," the poet is incredibly limited, and there is little to no room for Osgood's variability. However, by associating herself with Fancy, Osgood

determines her own fate in the literary world. Fancy is sentenced to life imprisonment, but the next morning her cell is found empty as she is able to outsmart Reason and escape. Osgood finds joy in her changeable character, and uses the alluring, mischievous innocence of the character of fairy-like Fancy to embody her poetic figure.

Joanne Dobson sees Osgood's salon work as distinctly more subversive than her published writing, describing it as "the work of a woman who was both a savvy sophisticate and skilled versifier" (633), which is certainly not the popular imagining of the nineteenth-century poetess. Dobson states that Osgood "seems to have seen no contradiction between her public verse and the compositions of her private life" (633) while implying that there was, in fact, a contradiction. Eliza Richards suggests that her salon poetry and her published poetry achieved the same goal, as "In her marriage of 'personal' and 'literary' characteristics... the literary not only became a vehicle for personal expression, but the personality became an increasingly literary production" (71). For Richards, then, her personal voice and her poetic voice became the same, each making her "an object of endless and often contradictory readerly fantasies" (71), which means that her salon and public voices served the same desired purpose in terms of her image. Richards discusses how Osgood, in her concocted, coquettish form, "teases the readers' tendency to mistake printed lyric 'voice' for embodied utterance and the figure of the poetess for an actual person" (64). The poetess character allowed Osgood to create "fantasies of intimacy" (65) between herself and her readers to gain their favor.

Osgood uses the poetess character to conflate herself with her poems and idealizes her femininity in an alluring ingénue type figure that widely appealed to her audience, and submitted to their wants. In "Had We But Met," she bemoans a missed opportunity of young love, flirting with the reader about what might have been. In the earlier days, when she was but "a timid girl,

all trust and truth” (8), she may have known the innocent love of a boy she could have met “in life’s delicious spring” (13). In recalling the memory, she expresses how “My full heart beats-my sad, droop’d lashes glisten- / I hear the music of thy *boyhood’s* vow!” (23-24). Her flirtatious posture of “droop’d lashes” and the visceral image of a “full heart” combined with this theme of “what could have been” is alluring and sensual, but removed from the reader. Separated by time, this love is now impossible, like a physical relationship between poet and reader, but the flirtation continues. Her use of the second person to draw the reader in and make every man believe that “thy *boyhood’s* vow” was his own long lost love illustrates the way in which she prospered from equating herself with the speaker of the poem, to embody that truthful poetess form, to create an imagined relationship with her readers. This flirtatious persona is at once a performance and an invitation to her readers to feel an intimate connection with herself as the human beyond the act. For this reason, the widespread popularity Osgood experienced allowed her to toy with her audience for her own gains, thus making the distinction between her “self” and her performance of “self” complex and variable.

In this vein, it is my belief that, unlike Dobson’s assertion that Osgood did not see a contradiction, this variability in voice represents Osgood’s refusal to be identified as a single type of author. If she sees a contradiction, she exploits it and allows her readers to follow her ever changing poetic will. The ability to produce multiple distinctive styles of poetry illustrates Osgood’s constructed nature, similar to Richard’s understanding of her “literary production.” I differ from Richards when I say that her production of an erotic character made her not an object of her reader’s fantasies, but instead a coproduction between those fantasies and her own delight in embracing a variable nature. Much like the verbal contradictions in her poetry, this seeming contradiction in her greater body of work gives credence to the notion that she built an image as



she saw fit, toying with the “social fact” (Dobson) of being a poetess. Her creation of self and her readers’ desires ensured that identifying as a poetess did not preclude her from also performing as a “savvy sophisticate” popular in the cultural hotbed of the New York salon scene, but rather allowed her to be both figures at once.

Her 1845 “To Sybil,” published in July of 1845 in *The Columbian Lady’s and Gentleman’s Magazine*, represents this salon socialite ability to toy with her readers while navigating the realm of fame and notoriety. In this work, Osgood praises feminine flirtations, proclaiming,

I know them all – the endearing wiles-  
The sweet, unconscious art-  
The graceful spells that nature taught  
Her darling’s docile heart. (29-32)

While Osgood suggests that these “wiles” are “unconscious” by nature, her statement that she “know[s] them all” implies more will in feminine seduction. Osgood knew something about “art”- both in her writing and her presentation of self. Osgood employs the “spells” of femininity in association with the role of the poetess. She flirtatiously connects with her readers, and at the same time, maintains the appropriate, idealized femininity through an abstract, childlike sexuality.

In the poem, the sense of Osgood’s performance is rampant. Osgood instructs a young bride in how to gain the affection of her new husband. Her advice depends on both playing to his ego and on winning him over with her “girlish wiles” (41). When Osgood tells the girl, “I know them all – the endearing wiles- / The sweet unconscious art-” (33-34), the reader understands that this is a game Osgood has played before. The way Osgood instructs the bride to earn her husband’s love is reminiscent of the manner by which Osgood interacts with her readers, all feminine grace and innocent flirtations. The way she utilizes the word “art” is particularly

compelling. As a function, “art” must be produced and is done so to create a sensual experience. At the same time, the word “unconscious” contrasts the act of producing art, yet another example of Osgood’s employment of contradictions.

Griswold, who heralded her as an ideal among female poets, praises these contradictory characteristics in his introduction to his selection of Osgood’s work in his anthology, *The Female Poets of America*. His review of her work celebrates her “grace,” and that, in her growth as a poet “her powers have seemed to expand and her sympathies to deepen” (Griswold 273). Even while Griswold acknowledges the “powers” in her writing, they are tempered by her ever deepening “sympathies,” a word that feels distinctly female. The word “seemed” implies that these contradictions are integral to public perceptions of her character. As long as she is able to appear gentle and honest, she can exercise her womanly “powers” through her poetry, and adopting the figure of the poetess allows her to do this by while evoking a flirtatious spirit of fancy within the code of poetess poetry.

This fanciful character helped Osgood to create a figure who was both sexually alluring and innocent. In this way, she promoted herself as an ideal, pure woman, while still flirtatiously drawing the attention of her readership with a provocative, salon figure. This performance of femininity is facilitated by her relationship with the poetess figure both in the expectations readers have of female poets, and the way the poetess allows Osgood to associate herself with the poems’ subjectivities. In the words of Richards, “The published poetess invoked both angelic purity and sexual promiscuity, spiritual amateurism and capitalist professionalism” (65). Much language in writings to and about Osgood centers on angelic imagery. A poem by an unidentified poet kept among Osgood’s papers describes her character as such:

And that the day perchance may come  
When thou will spread thy snowy pinions

And flee far to the spiral home  
Thy haven in God's blest dominions!

Oh shouldst thou take that upward flight-  
With grief would earthly hearts be risen,  
E'en though we know that angels bright-  
Must welcome thee- "a STAR in Heaven!" (25-32) <sup>3</sup>

The poet, in praise of Osgood, suggests that even in life she has "snowy," pure white wings and that her "home" is in Heaven, "God's blest dominions." Death, for Osgood, would just be spreading those wings and returning to her blessed home among those like her. And while her death would bring grief on earth, she will be welcomed by "angels bright," and even those figures will treat her as "a STAR in Heaven." The capitalization of STAR and the manner in which the last phrase is set apart by a dash and quotation marks suggests that the voices of the angels already in Heaven will come together to welcome her. She is, in some way, more angelic than angels, a star among celestial beings. Additionally, the poem suggests a strange relationship with death. Death may only make her more holy, and her public appeal only increases after death, as she becomes that much more unattainable.

And yet, the same poet suggests that Osgood has the qualities of a "fairy," which has a fanciful, mercurial implication, when he says:

They tell me that a fairy kind  
Presided o'er thine earliest hours  
Endowing thee with gems of mind  
And grace of soul- the spirit's flowers! (17-20)

The use of the pronoun "they" suggests a notoriety surrounding Osgood's figure such that her history is a topic of public knowledge and import. To have been raised by a "fairy," and to have

---

<sup>3</sup> Unsigned manuscript included in the Frances Sargent Locke Osgood papers, 1838-1850 (MS Am 1355). Houghton Library, Harvard University.

been “endowed” with fairylike “gems of mind / And grace of soul,” combines images of a mischievous creature, with grace in a way that mirrors the way she plays the role of both the child and the coquette. Her flirtatious figure relies heavily on the belief that she had an angelic spirit. She could be a fairy, a flirt, and fancy, so long as she was also pure. In “Won’t You Die and Be a Spirit,” which is, as Dobson notes, an unpublished poem, Osgood accomplishes this kind of alluring effect on her readers while remaining distant and pure, even if this accomplishment edges on the bizarre, much like the discussion of death in the poem addressed to her. She asks her lover to die so that he can spend the night with her, imploring “If only you were a spirit / You could stay.”<sup>4</sup> This excuse for social transgression toys with purity. On one hand, Osgood allows her speaker to remain pure, but at the same time, she juggles the strange intimacy of sharing a bed with the request that her lover die. The sexualization of both the speaker and the spirit is direct and distant, alluring and haunting.

This playing with feminine purity and sexuality is characteristically Osgood in the way she appeals to illusions of intimacy with appropriately feminine distance. The second person structure of the poem creates an intimate environment between the poet and the reader, mirroring the distant intimacy between the speaker and the lover. Osgood is asking her reader how far they would go to share an intimacy with her: if they would die for her. It is as if Osgood has adopted a medieval, chivalric relationship with her readers through her construction of her ideally feminine character. That understanding has subsequently demonstrated its mutuality by the attitude towards death expressed towards her. There is something noble in death, and the appeal of death in “Won’t You Die and Be a Spirit” is both in the intimacy and the knowledge that no true intimacy can ever exist.

---

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from Dobson’s “Sex, Wit, and Sentiment: Frances Osgood and the Poetry of Love.”

It is this flirtation without consummation that characterizes the figure of “Fancy.” As she explains in “To Sibyl,” it is with “girlish wiles” (41) that the young bride can ensure that her husband “cannot choose but love” (42). In this way, Osgood ensures that her audience cannot help but love her, as she carefully constructs her image to meet both the poetess they desire and the salon femininity she makes so appealing. Osgood represents purity with the distance between herself and her readers, while still evoking a promise of intimacy with her language.

### **Critics, Readers, and Writer in Collaboration**

Osgood’s relationship with her audience created a sense of intimacy between writer and reader, real or imagined, which ensured that being Osgood’s reader meant something special. Her variable character allowed her readers to cast her in whatever light they saw fit, and thus, her construction of identity became a collaborative experience between herself and her audience. To read her was to know her, and to know her was to engage with her on a deeper level. Fellow writers cast themselves in the role of her reader when discussing her works. Critics, too, saw themselves as intimately entangled with her personal life and values, allowing their perception of her character to influence reviews of her work and further complicating the constructed nature of her figure.

As reader, critic, and poet all engaged in a shared production of her character through a shared sense of intimacy, Osgood capitalized on her public desirability. She took advantage of her place in the system to make the system work for her. For Richards, the act of engaging her readers so intimately, yet from a distance, is central to Osgood’s widespread success. It was practiced and produced based on her knowledge of the literary market:

Recognizing her status as a literary commodity, Osgood cultivated a lyric personality that anticipated, promoted, and responded to the desires of magazine readers. Because

antebellum readers were accustomed to associating female publication with promiscuity, Osgood could reverse the equation so that female sexuality functioned as an expression of print promiscuity. (80)

Osgood toyed with the provocative, seemingly promiscuous character as a way to increase her readership. As Richards states, women publishing in the nineteenth century had to worry about being considered promiscuous, but Osgood instead chose to embrace that potentially dangerous characterization for her own ends. This helped her become more widely published and, in doing so, connect to a broader readership. By playing into their desires, she could start the cycle of publication all over again. The access she allowed her readers to herself as a “commodity” reflects the reciprocal nature of her career. She wrote what the public wanted, the public responded with the belief that she was writing just for them and engaged in a conversation which shaped her work across her many varied personae.

This can in part be explained by the growing role of critics and the critical reception of poets in the public’s reading of poetry. Mary Louise Kete suggests that in the mid-nineteenth century, poetry played a very different role in the lives of the American people. It was a fixture of everyday life, and, “Though for the most part lost upon modern readers, poetry remained a consistent domestic art that played differing yet key roles in the constitution and reproduction of relationships within communities in the nineteenth century” (18). This attitude towards poetry marks the way Osgood’s readers would have related to reading her work. Poetry was used to express thoughts and feelings among family members and friends and became a part of “communities.” The shift from an exchange market to commercial market, in which Osgood published, did not happen all at once, and the two economies existed, for a time, in tandem. Even as poetry evolved to a more commercially viable market and the role of the critic increased its

ability to shape what poetry gained wide circulation, the impact of the reader's engagement remained important.

While previously poetry circulated without a name in a more exchange based poetic culture, in this period poets began demanding that their names be associated with their works. The value of poetry became dependent upon the public reception of a poet, and this gave readers and critics more control over content. Kete examines the expanding role of the critic in this transitional period of poetry. While Kete's conclusions help illuminate the changing nature of poetry, they fall short in terms of Osgood's career. In Kete's words:

On the market pole of the axis of circulation, authority is vested outside the reader in the author and in institutionalized arbiters of taste such as editors, critics and publishers. Now consumers rather than patrons, readers increasingly sought and enjoyed authoritative guidance to make sense of the proliferation of American poetry. (30)

The roles of critic and reader in Osgood's career differ from the lines drawn by Kete in understanding the market as a whole. Readers may have turned more and more to "editors, critics, and publishers," and those three figures did much to shape the public's perception of Osgood's work, but it was because they felt a similar stake in her career. Critics put forward an image of Osgood's character that the reading public wholeheartedly believed to be true, such that critics reinforced the readers and readers reinforced the critics. They worked in collaboration with Osgood herself to construct a desirable public image.

Still, the increasing voice of "institutionalized arbiters of taste" regarding "the proliferation of American poetry" gives the critic a newly increased influence over how a poet, recently empowered by having their name attached to their work, is received by the public. In this regard, critics played a significant role in Osgood's image. One arena where this is particularly apparent is in early reviews of Osgood's work. The exercise of this critical authority over female poets is reflected in the way these reviews adopted a personal treatment of Osgood's

character. Readers expected a poetess to be the object of purity, and these critics took that as their cue to speak to the moral character of their subject. These reviews help “make sense” of Osgood’s value as a woman poet in their assessment of her moral character by reasserting the qualities readers desired to see in her. Early reviews of Osgood and her work demonstrate an intriguing sense of ownership over her character as a young poetess.

In November of 1838, just as she was gaining popularity under her own name at the age of twenty-seven, the *Baltimore Literary Monument* included Osgood in an article entitled “Our Female Poets,” where her work appeared alongside that of eight other women. The title invokes a sense of public ownership over her and her contemporaries. As a female poet, it appears her work and her public image were not her own. Of her work the reviewer says:

Her poems have never been collected, though they would make a volume very creditable to one of her age. It is, however, better that she should wait till the changes of life shall awaken more of these strong sympathies of the soul, which vivify and elevate the genius of woman. As yet, she has never affected a lofty theme—but takes whatever the passing moment suggests and generally her heart turns to the dear, cherished affections of home and friends. She is, moreover, of a cheerful temperament, and *life, love, and happiness* are to her synonymous terms. Hence the deepest tones of her genius have never yet been sounded: it is only *actual suffering*, that will teach a sanguine disposition that there is light in the darkness of affliction... She writes from her feelings, and her content mood of mind is poetical; hence there is a naturalness and simple grace in her metaphors and diction which are original and very pleasing. (“Our Female Poets” 77)

The criticism in this review centers less on her poetry than on the way her moral development should shape her poetry, and uses language that categorizes her as young and inexperienced. The “genius of woman” comes from “strong sympathies of the soul,” and as a young poetess, Osgood does not yet have the proper “changes of life” to “awaken” them. The use of the word “awaken” suggests that these sympathies are something innate within her, as though her truly emotionally raw poetry is just waiting to be released fully formed once she has had the proper level of experience. Osgood appears to have less agency in the writing of her poems, as it implies they



only need to be awoken. The critic offers the suggestion that the only way to access the “deepest tones of her genius” is to experience “actual suffering.” This outlandish statement reflects the ownership the critic feels over her work and her development as an artist. While the “naturalness and simple grace” of her work are “very pleasing,” the critic feels it is his place to suggest the developmental route Osgood’s internal life must take before she can be a great poet. Because female poetic genius was viewed nothing more than “the exuberance of personal ‘feelings unemployed’” and only “partakes of some of the qualities of genius” (Griswold 7), the critic understands that complex poetic content for women can only be the result emotional distress. This understanding of the female poet as a reflection of her most inner and intimate emotions sheds light on the way critics took early ownership over Osgood, her work, and her personal development.

This discussion of Osgood relies on her seeming inexperience in life. It paints a portrait of a woman who has never known suffering and delights in the pretty things in life. When the critic writes, “She is, moreover, of a cheerful temperament, and *life, love, and happiness* are to her synonymous terms,” he conjures an image of childlike purity and innocence. This idea that she is so “cheerful” explains the way the public viewed her as a figure from the very beginning. While the language used to describe the other female poets discussed in the article includes similar mentions of feeling and female genius, it is only the review of Osgood’s work that carries an infantilizing tone. Even the poets who write for children are described as doing so for the children’s edification, while Osgood writes for adults and is treated like a child. The review describes how Hannah F. Gould, a contemporary of Osgood’s, “did not appear before the public as a writer till her powers of mind were matured, and she has, therefore, few juvenile errors of fancy or regret.” The association of “fancy” with “juvenile errors” and “regret” sheds light on the

reception of Osgood's poetry later in her career. She was a poetess who adopted the guise of fancy until the end of her life, and if fancy is deemed juvenile, her poetry takes on a childlike quality.

The public watched Osgood with the eyes of someone older and wiser overseeing the development of a child, which accounts for the reception of the variability in her work and the sentiments of public ownership over her character. Similar public interest in her purity, femininity and the development of her morality continues in other reviews. That same November, the *New Yorker* published a review of her poetry which included the following conclusions:

She bids fair to take the first rank among our native female poets. Her verses display a power of harmonious versification, a felicity of thought, and a command of graceful diction, which we have rarely seen surpassed... She possesses, besides these mental charms, personal attractiveness and beauty. ("Mrs. Frances S. Osgood" 142)

This review attributes more skill to her work than many others have, but tempers that acknowledgment of skill with comments on her "personal attractiveness and beauty." The discussion of her "harmonious versification" along with her "command of graceful diction" suggest a certain skill in writing. Harmony and felicity are her "power," which makes her an active figure in the composition of her poetry. Her power is also in her "felicity of thought," a reminder to the reader that her writing is pleasing and a source of joy to her. Her thoughts must make her happy and contribute to her "mental charms." The language of praise used is distinctly gendered, as "felicity" and "charm" elicit notions of distinctly feminine virtues. This language suggests she is talented and valuable in the way she expresses herself as a woman and embodies suitably womanly abilities.

The review turns from a criticism on her work to a warning against the corruption of her morality and talent.

The character of her genius seems to be superior to the effects of flattery; but she must be well-guarded to escape the many temptations of praise by which her career will be attended. Her danger of being spoiled is aggravated by her pretensions to wit as well as fancy. (142)

Once the “character of her genius” comes under consideration, the tone shifts. This shift suggests a moral ownership the writer seems to feel over Osgood’s public figure. While the writer perceives her character to be “superior to the effects of flattery,” he still feels as though he is in the position to offer personal advice. The notion that she “must be well-guarded” against the forces around her suggests that she is some young ingénue who must be protected by the more worldly figure in her life. However, the critic has no personal connection to Osgood which might elicit this kind of advice. Additionally, the thought that she may fall to the “temptations of praise” and be “spoiled” implies a severely limited and constricting conception of the poetess. Like Eve who is flattered by the snake in the garden, she will be pure only until she falls to the “temptation” of “praise,” a womanly and unartful weakness. “Praise” will spoil Osgood because, as a poetess who is believed to write naturally simply because she cannot help but write, she should not search for fame. Her poetry should be an expression of her soul, not a professionally motivated endeavor.

The critic goes so far as to warn her that her “pretensions to wit as well as fancy” may endanger her. “Wit” and “fancy” are only admissible so long as they do not interfere with the purity of the poetess’s temperament. These two traits are characteristic of one of her public personas, the flirtatious salon socialite, but not of her more pure poetess figure. As we saw before, “fancy” is an attribute of the young and immature. If she submits entirely to these predispositions, she will ruin herself as a female poet and childlike figure, and the critic sees it as his role to warn her against that error. At this time, Osgood is a twenty-seven year old woman, married, with a child. Yet the notion of childlike purity persists. The critic’s belief that he can

make these sweeping generalizations regarding Osgood's moral development demonstrates the way the public believed it had possession of its poetesses. Additionally, it suggests a belief that the public had direct access to the poetess's interiority and character.

As seen in earlier examples of her work and public response, this sense of ownership and belief in Osgood's childlike moral purity explains the way in which the American public was able to justify the duality of her professional personae. By applying innocent language to Osgood and relying on a constant image of her childlike innocence, her readership could view all of her work under the guise of that perception. Because of her career as a poetess, her flirtatious tone was just another aspect of a natural expression of her soul. Additionally, critics suggest that what Osgood sacrificed in terms of "high art," she achieved in terms of range. The poetess who chooses to embody fancy long past the time when it is deemed appropriate creates a complicated image for herself. Criticism suggests that Osgood crafted a figure which required that she often had to sacrifice being taken seriously as a mature poetess with womanly knowledge. In exchange, she was widely read and given permission to run amok in the literary world as a fairy like child for the whole of her career.

In an 1846 article, Edgar Allan Poe reviewed her first collection, *A Wreath of Wild Flowers from New England*, which was released only in England in 1838, along with more recent works, and draws some broader conclusions regarding her range of work. Poe states that Osgood's "character is daguerreotyped in her works—reading the one we know the other," again standing by the notion that she is "the very soul of truth and honor" (129) in life and her poetry. This idea that her interiority is her poetry helps to reconcile the variation between poems, especially as Poe discusses nearly a decade of her poetry as one body. Her subject matter may

differ, but at least it is all true. However, it is what Poe has to say about her grace that lends most to the discussion of her duality as a writer.

For Poe, though her content varies, what stays the same is her “grace,” and that is what is most important in her poetry. He says of her work,

What is really new in this volume shows a marked change in the themes, in the manner, in the whole character of the poetess. We see less of vivacity, less of fancy; more of tenderness, earnestness, even passion, and of the true imagination as distinguished from its subordinate fancy: the one prevalent and predominating trait, grace, alone distinctly remains. (127)

Poe writes that “with more method, more industry, more definite purpose... [s]he might, upon the whole have written better poems,” but that would have been at the loss of her grace which “springs plainly from necessity—the necessity of invention.” Again, it is this natural need to write and produce that Poe identifies as the source of her work, and it is from that process that her grace arises. So while her content may shift from “vivacity” and “fancy” to “tenderness” and “earnestness,” it is the prevailing “grace” that unites her poetry. She does not produce “high art,” Poe admits her poetry could be better with improved “method,” but she makes up for that in a grace which justifies her broad range and appeal.

In her poetry, Osgood embraces this duality and the role she has chosen to play. In the poem “Caprice,” published in *Graham’s Magazine* in 1846 once she has had an established career and is in her mid-thirties, she celebrates her “changeability”:

Reprove me not, that I still change  
                     With every changing hour,  
 For glorious Nature gives me leave,  
                     In wave and cloud and flower!

And you and all the world would do –  
                     If all but dared—the same.  
 True to myself—if false to you—  
                     Why should I reek your blame?

Then cease your carping, cousin mine,  
     Your vain reproaches cease;  
 I revel in my right divine,  
     I glory in Caprice! (Osgood 1-12)

Osgood suggests that it is natural for her to “change” as the “changing hour” allows for such ambiguity from moment to moment. She looks to “Nature” to explain her behavior, noting the ways the “wave and cloud and flower” shift and change. Her choice of objects evokes a multiplicity of imagery to excuse her way. The ocean wave expresses a tumult and depth, while the cloud is airy and easily blown apart, and the flower is grounded in the earth but has a colorful life of its own. These three natural images imply that Osgood can adopt any of those attributes and still be natural. Additionally, those images appear all over poetess poetry, as natural images of the earth and flowers were appropriate topics for women to write on. She also embraces the childlike image she has been given by suggesting that she is still growing like a flower.

Furthermore, she says that “all the world” would adopt this kind of changing lifestyle “If all but dared.” She implies that it is unnatural to live so rigidly, but it is also a risk to adapt to change so readily. In this regard, she is “True to” herself in her willingness to engage in the unpredictability of change, and if that does not appear “true” to others, then they simply do not understand. She feels as though she earns no “blame” by living a variable life. She addresses this poem to her “cousin,” suggesting a kind of familial influence that rejects her lifestyle. This may play into the way the public passes judgments on her character as well as her poetry. If her cousin’s “carping” is in “vain,” then there is no reason to believe that public influence would have any kind of effect on her. The idea that “caprice” is a “right divine” in which to “glory” shapes an image of Osgood’s character. She finds truth and holiness in variability, having accepted it both as her true nature and as a “right” from God. The inversion of pious poetess

imagery into an explanation for the instability of her truth reflects Osgood's willingness to toy with her public persona and adapt to and address criticism.

Poetry directed towards Osgood suggests an acceptance of this seemingly dichotomous nature. In 1847, at the height of Osgood's popularity, Mary Sumner published a poem entitled "Fanny," the familiar nickname often used to refer to Osgood by her literary contemporaries, in *Graham's Magazine*. It includes an epigraph from Osgood's "Caprice," which states, "I revel in my right divine-- / I glory in Caprice," and the poem appears to be a direct answer to the original piece by Osgood. This quote sets the tone for the poem, which acknowledges Osgood's ever changing presentation of self:

Firm of purpose, proud and high,  
With a flashing, dauntless eye,  
Yet impulsive, gay and wild,  
Now a queen and now a child,  
Now a woman, mild and wise,  
Strong to counsel and advise,  
Full of nobleness and truth,  
Of the generous zeal of youth,  
So enchanting and so divine,  
That all who please and shine,  
None can match her own sweet self;  
Now a sportive, wilful elf,  
Whose least word and will and way,  
Strongest reasons oversway—  
Who can count on the vagary  
Of the charming, changeful fairy? (Sumner 90- 105)

Still, Sumner continues to ponder how, "you cannot choose but love her, / With a love that passes over / Whatsoe'er it cannot praise, / For the sake of her sweet ways" (118-121). Much like Poe's assessment of her enduring "grace," Sumner cites her "sweet ways" as what draws people to her despite her changeability. The graceful way Sumner interweaves the paradoxical images of Fanny's performance echoes the implied way those performances appear in reality. She is "proud and high," and "yet impulsive, gay and wild." The image of "Now a queen and now a child"

plays with the way Osgood adopted sophisticated personae and childlike innocence in equal measure. She is both “Full of nobleness and truth,” like the honest poetess who speaks from learned emotional truths, but still remains full of “the generous zeal of youth.” This “vagary” is “enchanted” as Fanny uses it to beguile her audience. Elsewhere in the poem, Sumner refers to it as “the secret of her witchery” (29). The dark language which describes her power always returns to “her own sweet self,” exonerating her from any notions of dishonesty. She is not a liar or a poseur, but rather a “fairy” and an “elf,” more mischievous in the end than dangerous. Sumner’s poem illustrates the variable and enticing relationship Osgood developed with her readership that allowed her to adopt a variety of traits and still be accepted.

The idea that “you cannot choose but love her” reflects Osgood’s intention and the very language she uses in “To Sybil.” The way she toys with her image demonstrates the way she employed the term poetess to respond to the desires of her audience. Osgood’s ever variable figure allowed her to step outside the confines of traditional poetess poetry. Her “charm” and “grace” sustained her as she chose range of work over pursuit of higher art. By embracing the poetess form to the extent that she accepted grace and an expectation of interiority as assets, Osgood was able to draw in reader’s attention through more provocative and flirtatious poetry than many other poetesses were writing. Sumner accepts and embraces this contradiction, even loves her for it. This suggests that as a reader and fellow poet, Sumner encouraged the changeability and helped Osgood to construct the fairy figure she so desired to achieve. Readers like Sumner allowed her to embody the public image she desired even as they shaped it with their own expectations. She was what they wanted her to be and whoever she chose to be at the same time because of the collaboration that took place between herself and her audience.



There is no clear distinction between reader, poet, and critic in terms of reaction to Osgood's work. Edgar Allan Poe served as all three, engaging with Osgood as a reader, a fellow writer, and as a critic. Richards explores this relationship in depth, examining the professional and personal aspects of their interactions. Osgood's relationship with Poe is highly indicative of the relationship she fostered with her greater reading audience. He started as a reader and critic, and engaged in public flirtation through published works. While Osgood was a much more widely read poet than Poe at the time, their friendship brought notoriety to each of their careers. Whether real or constructed, their flirtatious exchanges garnered real attention and spurred gossip in their community which impacted both their public figures. Osgood's role was, at times, that of the "Slandered Poetess," victim of defamatory rumors, but also loved for the very reason she was a target of such gossip. Her "wit so rare and grace so peerless" drew in her contemporaries- readers, writers and critics alike- such that her professional and personal characters were shaped by those relationships.

Other writers engaged in similar, though less notorious, relations with Osgood. She exchanged poems with a variety of writers, but even her fellow writers positioned themselves as readers in relation to her. That speaks to the unique relationship Osgood created between herself and her readership. There was a thrill in being Osgood's reader that made even writers revel in identifying as her reader- a special intimacy, real or manufactured, which allowed her readers access to her in a personal manner. In this way, poets were able to both publish and converse with each other through their poetry. Mary Hewitt, the editor of the "Memorial," identified as a longtime friend of Osgood and a fellow poet from Boston, engaged in published conversations expressing mutual love and admiration in periodicals like *The Knickerbocker*. When Osgood published "A Valentine. Affectionately Inscribed to Mrs. Mary E. Hewitt" in February of 1847,

Hewitt responded in April of the same year with “A Lay of the Heart. Affectionately Inscribed to Mrs. Frances S. Osgood.” The poetesses reinforce each other’s fame and careers in their public correspondence, suggesting a lively culture of communication between writers and readers in which these two female poets actively engaged.

In “A Valentine,” Osgood addresses Hewitt with a combination of romantic and traditional poetess language, again embracing Hewitt as an intimate because she is her reader and a fellow poet. The poem begins with a request for intimacy from Osgood to Hewitt, as she asks:

I.

While passion’s sigh and Cupid’s dart,  
Around us fly from heart to heart;  
Dear one! will sister-love like mine  
Be welcomed in a Valentine?

II.

Ah, yes! for in thy generous heart,  
Frank, loyal, fond and free from art,  
No craving for light flattery dwells,  
No poor and false ambition swells.

III.

Calmly thou wearest thine own bright bays,  
Freely thou yieldest another praise;  
I love thy soul—take thou from mine  
A sister’s truthful Valentine. (Osgood 1-12)

The combination of romantic imagery, sisterly affection and the shared experience with fame demonstrates how the literary and the personal blended in their relationship. Hewitt is her “Dear one,” the recipient of “sister-love” and a “heart to heart” connection. What makes Hewitt’s heart so appealing to Osgood is its “generous” nature. Here, Osgood delves into the language of female poets, praising Hewitt for being “Frank, loyal, fond and free from art.” The poet “free from art” highlights the way both these women navigated the literary world of the time. They

were valued for their honesty above all else. Hewitt, as poet and reader, exemplifies the connection between the two women who worked within the same parameters. Osgood's relationship with Hewitt demonstrates how her career depended on these kinds of relationships with readers.

Like Osgood, Hewitt's inherent value lies in the fact that she has no need for "flattery," and that she is famous despite a lack of "ambition." This discussion of fame between the two women accounts for their connection, as Hewitt wears her laurel wreath of praise "calmly" without show, and accepts praise by yielding to it, not demanding it. Osgood's love of her fellow poetess's soul exemplifies their shared language of fame and poetry, and draws attention to the importance of fellow poets as her readers. When Hewitt reads her work and praises it, Osgood listens, and this exchange of admiration shapes Osgood's public character to mutually desirable traits.

When Hewitt responds in April with "A Lay of the Heart," she echoes the themes evoked by Osgood in "A Valentine." The language of fame and purity overlap with a knowledge of Osgood's body of work and a mutual respect for her as a writer and contemporary. The language of their friendship is tempered by language of public life in a way which demonstrates how inextricably linked Osgood's work was with her public image. Hewitt begins the poem with a discussion of Osgood's fame:

When Fame around thy beauteous brow  
     Her green and fadeless bay had wound,  
 Above the 'wreath of wild flowers' though  
     Had'st o'er thy youthful temples bound;

We met. But ah! t'was not for this;  
     Not that the world, with loud acclaim,  
 Had given the poet's deathless meed  
     To gild for aye thy gentle name. (1-8)

Hewitt is sure to note in these stanzas that, while she met Osgood after she had become famous, it was not the fame which drew Hewitt to her. Her use of the word “bay” as Osgood had used it suggests a shared experience of fame. When Hewitt refers to Osgood’s bay, she is returning the compliment dealt to her by Osgood and expressing their similarities. With her reference to Osgood’s “wreath of wild flowers,” Hewitt is recalling Osgood’s first published collection and thus positioning herself as a reader of her work. Though Hewitt met her at the beginnings of her fame, she met her first as a reader who appreciated her for more than her name.

Hewitt continues to express how she loves Osgood for more than her fame and public standing, and enumerates these reasons in the following stanzas:

Oh! not for this I sought thee then,  
     And not for this I prize thee now;  
 But for thy winning, guileless ways;  
     And for thy love-illuminated brow:

And for thy pure, confiding heart,  
     That never yet it’s truth forsook;  
 Which met my own in generous faith,  
     And opened to me its golden book.

And I must eat lotus fruit  
     That brings to all forgetfulness  
 Or ever I forego thy praise,  
     Or teach my heart to love thee less. (Hewitt 9-20)

Hewitt reiterates that it was not for fame that she sought Osgood’s friendship, but for her honesty and love. These enduring qualities are what sustain the relationship, not fame and public life.

Hewitt draws attention to her “pure, confiding heart,” as if to point out that Osgood has remained pure despite fame and has not been corrupted by public image. And in her willingness to share herself, Hewitt again positions herself as Osgood’s reader. This time, she is a reader of Osgood herself, who has shared her “heart” as if she “opened to [Hewitt] its golden book.” By comparing

Osgood's mind to a book, and a precious golden one at that, Hewitt shares how special it is to be Osgood's reader. The intimacy of "oped," of sharing something often hidden, suggests that as her friend and also as her reader, Hewitt has witnessed Osgood's truths intimately. Her wish to "eat lotus fruit" before she stops singing Osgood's praises speaks to the value gained by sharing this intimacy with Osgood. For Hewitt, one may as well forget everything if one were to forget the beauty learned from Osgood's life and work.

In a desire to preserve that memory, it was Hewitt's wish to commemorate that image of Osgood upon her death in 1850. When Osgood died, tragically of consumption at the age of 39, the public responded based on the love and closeness they felt with her as a writer and public figure. She welcomed readers into her world, flirted with them, toyed with them, and brought them along with her as she flitted about from identity to identity. She used her femininity and poetess position to work within and around public expectations, gaining their affection with her spirit of fancy. When Samuel Osgood interred his wife at Mount Auburn Cemetery without a headstone, Hewitt commissioned some sixty writers to pen anecdotal accounts, messages, poems and prose to and inspired by Osgood. Published and sold as a fundraiser to purchase a memorial to mark the grave. Entitled simply *The Memorial*, the collection illustrates the personal relationship she created between her readers and herself.

In the preface, Hewitt recalls how a group of writers gathered after her death, and how "To nearly all who were present she had been known, and by as many as had known her she had been loved" (1). Over fifty writers and artists contributed to the work, and, even in death, the conversation between Osgood and her readers continued. Mary Hewitt edited, wrote the introduction for, and contributed five poems to the collection, much in the same way she engaged with Osgood's career and friendship in life. Other contributors included Lydia Hunt

Sigourney, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bayard Taylor, Sarah Helen Whitman, and painter Miner K. Kellogg. Rufus Griswold penned a brief biography in which he identified Osgood as “the finest intelligence that woman has in our time” (14), and poems heralded her beauty, poise, and talent. Mary L. Seward contributed a poem entitled “Our ‘Pearl,’” the title claiming shared ownership over Osgood’s beauty and value. She addresses Osgood in the second person, calling to Osgood:

It is the thought of thee, oh, fairest child!  
 Our living gem, our pearl of beauty rare!  
 Whose glow of purity, and love, and light,  
 With naught of earthly treasure we compare. (Seward 5-8)

Osgood’s death does not end the childlike imagery surrounding her character. After a full life, she is still the “fairest child,” and the collectively possessed “our living gem, our pearl of beauty rare.” After Seward compares Osgood to a pair of “earthly treasures,” she says that there is no comparison, as if Osgood is not of this world due to her “purity, and love, and light.” The language of this poem and many other works in the collection implies that Osgood was better than this earth, and Seward ponders how she “may not tarry with thee long” (13), as if the angelic Osgood is returning to the heavens where she belongs. The contributors to *The Memorial* ensure that her image retains its angelic purity and eternal youth in her early death.

The memorial erected at the site of her burial (Image 1) speaks volumes to the love felt towards Fanny Osgood shared by an adoring public. The marble column is topped by a copper casting of a lyre and a laurel wreath, proclaiming her identity as a poet and a beloved public figure. In death, she is memorialized by her talents and famous figure. For Osgood, who so dutifully navigated the intricacies of female fame in the nineteenth-century, this final memorial illustrates the intimacy of her public life. Her readership shared in the production of her image as it would be remembered by all who visit her eternal resting place.



Image 1. (Photo taken by the author, 3/8/14, Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, MA)

## Bibliography

- Bennett, Paula. "Frances Sargent Osgood." *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets: An Anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1998. Print.
- . *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry 1800-1900*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003. Print.
- De Jong, Mary. "Frances Sargent Osgood." *Antebellum Writers in New York: Second Series*. Ed. Kent P. Ljungquist. Dictionary of Literary Biography (DLB) 250. 274-284. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2002. Web
- De Jong, Mary G. "Frances Sargent Osgood." *Writers of the American Renaissance: An A-to-Z Guide*. Ed. Denise D, Knight. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2003. 282-286. Web.
- Dobson, Joanne. "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature." *American Literature*. 69:2 (Jun., 1997), 263-288. Web.
- Dobson, Joanne. "Sex, Wit, and Sentiment: Frances Osgood and the Poetry of Love." *American Literature*. 64: 4. (December 1993): 631-50. Web.
- Frances Sargent Locke Osgood Papers, 1838-1850* (MS Am 1355). Houghton Library, Harvard University. Manuscript.
- The Friends of the late Mrs. Osgood. *The Memorial*. Ed. Mary E. Hewitt. New York, NY: George P. Putnam, 1851. Print.
- Griswold, Rufus Wilmot. *The Female Poets of America*. Philadelphia, PA: Carey and Hart, 1849. Google Books. Web.
- . "Frances Sargent Osgood." *International Monthly Magazine* (December 1850): 131-40. Web.



- . "Frances Sargent Osgood." *Wellman's Literary Miscellany* (Feb 1, 1851.) 71-84. American Periodicals. Web.
- Hewitt, Mary E. "A Lay of the Heart: Affectionately Inscribed to Mrs. Frances S. Osgood." *The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine*. 29: 4. (Apr 1847.) 347. American Periodicals. Web.
- Kete, Mary Louise. "The Reception of Nineteenth-Century American Poetry." *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*. Ed. Kerry Larson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Print.
- . *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America*. Durham, NC. Duke University Press, 1999. Print.
- Kilcup, Karen L. "The Conversation of 'The Whole Family': Gender, Politics, and Aesthetics in Literary Tradition." *Soft Canons: American Women Writers & Masculine Tradition*. Ed. Karen L. Kilcup. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999. Print.
- Klotz, Sarah. "A Flight from Home: Negotiations of Gender and Nationality in Frances Osgood's Early Career." *Transatlantic Women: Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers and Great Britain*. Ed. Beth L. Lueck, Brigitte Bailey, and Lucinda L. Damon-Bach. Lebanon, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2012. Print.
- Jackson, Virginia. *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005. Print.
- . "The Poet as Poetess." *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*. Ed. Kerry Larson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Jackson, Virginia, and Eliza, Richards. "'The Poetess' and Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets." *Poetess Archive Journal*. 1: 1 (April 2007) 1-7. Web.

Loeffelholz, Mary. *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004. Print.

"Mrs. Frances S. Osgood." *The New Yorker* 6: 9. (Nov 17, 1838) 149. American Periodicals. Web.

Osgood, Frances Sargent. *Poems*. Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1850. Print.

---. "Caprice" *Poems*. Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1850. 212. Print.

---. "Flight of Fancy." *Poems*. Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1850. 35. Print.

---. "Had We But Met." *Poems*. Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1850. 115. Print.

---. "The Lily's Reply." *Poems*. Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1850. 356. Print.

---. "To My Pen." *Poems*. Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1850. 169. Print.

---. "To a Slandered Poetess." *Poems*. Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1850. 172. Print.

---. "To the Spirit of Poetry." *Poems*. Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1850. 19. Print.

---. "The Star and the Flower." *Poems*. Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1850. 331. Print.

---. "To Sybil." *Poems*. Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1850. 161. Print.

---. *Poems*. New York: Clark & Austin, 1846. (Reprinted) Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Library, 2005. Print.

---. "A Valentine: Affectionately Inscribed to Mrs. Mary E. Hewitt." *The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine*. 29: 2 (Feb 1847) 128; American Periodicals. Web.

Ostriker, Alicia Susan. *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1986. Print.

"Our Female Poets" *The Baltimore Literary Monument (1838-1839)*. (Nov 1838) 72; American Periodicals. Web.

- Poe, E. A. "THE LITERATI OF NEW YORK CITY.--NO. V." *Godey's Magazine and Lady's Book*. 3: 126. (1844-1848) American Periodicals Series. Web.
- Richards, Eliza. "Frances Sargent Osgood, Salon Poetry, and the Erotic Voice of Print." *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe's Circle*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.
- Seward, Mary L. "Our 'Pearl.'" *The Memorial*. Ed. Mary E. Hewitt. New York, NY: George P. Putnam, 1851. Print.
- Sumner, Mary. "Fanny." *Graham's American Monthly Magazine of Literature, Art, and Fashion* (1844-1858). 30: 3 (Mar 1847) 179. American Periodicals. Web.
- Walker, Cheryl. *The Nightingale's Burden: Woman Poets and American Culture Before 1900*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982. Print.
- Warren, Joyce C. *The (Other) American Tradition: Nineteenth-Century Woman Writers*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993. Print.
- Watts, Emily Stipes. *Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1977. Print.
- Wendorff, Laura C. "'The Vivid Dreamings of an Unsatisfied Heart': Gender Ideology, Literary Aesthetics, and the 'Poetess' in Nineteenth-Century America." *ATQ (The American Transcendental Quarterly)*. University of Rhode Island. 2001. *HighBeam Research*. 2 Apr. 2013. Web.
- Wolosky, Shira. "Modest Claims." *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Volume 4, Nineteenth-Century Poetry, 1800-1910*. Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.

